Chapter Three

ELECTRA

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The start of Sophocles' Electra *sees the return of Orestes to his native Mycenae, accompanied by his faithful slave, the Paedagogus. Years before, Orestes' mother, Clytemnestra, together with her lover, Aegisthus, had killed his father, Agamemnon, on his return from the Trojan War; the young Orestes was spirited away to friends in Phocis by his elder sister, Electra. Now he has returned, ordered by Apollo to avenge by stealth his father's murder. He declares that he and the Paedagogus will now make offerings at his father's tomb; after that, the Paedagogus will come back to the house and announce that Orestes had been killed at the Pythian Games at Delphi. Suddenly, the pair hear a cry off-stage: it is Electra, Orestes' sister. They leave before she can see them.*

Electra comes on stage and sings a lament for her father. The chorus, a group of young local women, arrive and join in her song; they seek to dissuade her from her perpetual mourning, but Agamemnon's unavenged murder makes her unwilling to stop. After the song Electra justifies herself to the chorus, describing her misfortunes. Then her sister, Chrysothemis, arrives; she has made her accommodation with the new rulers, and tells her sister that, if she fails to stop her laments, Aegisthus and Clytemnestra will imprison her underground. After failing to persuade her sister, Chrysothemis announces that Clytemnestra has sent her to make offerings at Agamemnon's tomb after having had a dream. The details of that dream, in which Agamemnon returned to his house to plant his sceptre in the hearth, causing a plant to sprout and cover the whole land of Mycenae, encourage Electra, who persuades

Chrysothemis to abandon Clytemnestra's gifts, and instead to make offerings from the sisters to their father.

A song from the chorus focuses on the prospect of Justice returning to the house to take vengeance on Agamemnon's killers. Yet it ends with ominous tones, referring to how, years before, Pelops cast his charioteer Myrtlius into the sea; ever since, evil has never left his house. At that moment Clytemnestra enters, launching a furious attack on her daughter, and attempting to justify her killing of Agamemnon by reference to his previous sacrifice of Iphigenia. Having secured permission to reply, Electra defends her father: the sacrifice of Iphigenia was required because, thanks to her father's mistaken killing of an animal in a grove sacred to Artemis, Artemis was restraining the winds for the Greek fleet, and so without the sacrifice there was no prospect of a journey to Troy or a return home. Her speech ends with an attack on her mother. The chorus note the bitterness of her words, and Clytemnestra responds in kind; the queen turns to make a prayer to Apollo, whose statue stands outside the house.

As if in answer to Clytemnestra's prayer, the Paedagogus enters with news of Orestes' death. Clytemnestra is giddy with excitement; Electra is broken. The death is described in a speech of remarkable vividness: after dramatic success at the Pythian Games, Orestes suffers a catastrophic crash at the climax of the chariot race. Momentarily in doubt as to whether she should call the news terrible or profitable, Clytemnestra soon recovers, and joyfully invites the Paedagogus inside; Electra grimly proclaims the depths of her new misery. Another lyric exchange follows between her and the chorus, as they fruitlessly attempt to console her.

Chrysothemis suddenly arrives with surprising news: Orestes is alive. There were fresh offerings at the tomb when she arrived there, and (she correctly infers)

only he could have left them there. But Electra believes that she knows the truth and refuses to believe; Chrysothemis is downcast to learn that she was mistaken. Suddenly Electra proposes a plan to her sister: the killing of Aegisthus. Chrysothemis rejects it as impractical, and the sisters part in anger. Another song follows from the chorus, in which they celebrate Electra's bravery and devotion to her father.

Orestes arrives, carrying the ashes that are supposed to be his own; he gives them to Electra (whom he does not recognize), who delivers a memorable lament over her brother's urn. In the course of that lament she reveals her identity; at its conclusion, Orestes is overcome with grief, too stunned at first to identify himself to her. Eventually he does so, taking back the urn; she responds with intense joy. During the song that follows Orestes attempts to curb her enthusiasm given their dangerous location in front of their enemies' house. He then sets out his plan to her, but before they can do anything there is a noise at the door: it is the Paedagogus, who roundly rebukes them for their carelessness. A further, briefer recognition scene follows, in which Electra encounters for the first time in many years the man who once helped her rescue the baby Orestes. Now they turn to the matter in hand; after a brief prayer to Apollo, Electra accompanies the two men into the house. The chorus briefly sing of their quest for vengeance.

Electra comes back on stage, in case Aegisthus returns as the men go about their task. Clytemnestra's screams for mercy can be heard from inside, while Electra delivers a merciless commentary on her mother's death. Orestes then returns, just as Aegisthus is seen approaching the house; he then heads back inside. Aegisthus has heard that Orestes is dead; Electra appears downcast, unusually compliant now that her last hope has apparently gone. Orestes and the Paedagogus enter with Clytemnestra's body, covered; when Aegisthus uncovers it, expecting to see Orestes,

he is shocked to see the dead body of his lover. He quickly realises that Orestes is speaking to him; Orestes forces him inside, to kill him in the very spot where his father was slain.

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Studying the reception of Sophocles' Electra *requires a detailed appreciation of its plot; hence its presentation above (albeit still in summary form) at such length. For the other six plays of Sophocles that have come down to us complete, no other tragic treatments from the classical period survived the end of the ancient world. If a modern play or painting evokes the tragic story of Ajax, say, or Philoctetes, there is a reasonable possibility that Sophocles provided the inspiration; Aeschylus'* Hoplôn Krisis (*"The Judgment of the Arms") or the* Philoctetes *dramas of Aeschylus and Euripides, which survive only in fragments, have not had the same impact on the creative minds of poets, painters, and film-makers. That is not to say that fragmentary drama has had no broader cultural reception -- just that it has been much less than that of the plays that survive in full.*

With Electra, however, matters are more complicated, thanks to the welcome survival of competing versions from the 5th century down to our own day: Aeschylus' Libation Bearers*, the second play of his* Oresteia *trilogy, and Euripides'* Electra *and* Orestes*. Electra is a character in these three other plays, which have been known in the Greek-speaking world continuously since their first performances, and in the west during antiquity and then again since the fifteenth century. So a painting or film that portrays Electra could be a response to one of these other works, or to more than one, rather than to Sophocles'* Electra *in particular. And artists who claim to be inspired*

by one of these plays may nevertheless have been affected by elements of the others. So care is needed if we are to discern to what extent Sophocles' Electra *is evoked by any later artform. Familiarity with the details of the plot and the overall character of the play offers us an opportunity to make these kinds of judgment.*

In Literature

The story of the reception of Sophocles' *Electra* begins with an unanswered question: did the play come before or after Euripides' play of the same name? The two dramas were probably produced within a few years of each other; the frequency in Euripides' iambic trimeters of resolutions (the substitution, under certain circumstances, of two short syllables in place of a long one) dates his play to between 422 and 416 BC, while similarities between Sophocles' *Electra* and his *Philoctetes* and *Oedipus at Colonus*, themselves securely dated to 409 and 401, suggest that this play was one of Sophocles' latest dramas.[1] But this data is insufficient to establish which came first. If Sophocles' play was prior, Euripides' drama would constitute the first known instance of its reception, with many in the audience for Euripides' play having already seen Sophocles'; when they heard that an *Electra* was to appear among Euripides' offerings at the dramatic festival that year, they would have wondered how he would interact with the recent drama by his elder contemporary. The question of priority is thus crucial for the interpretation and reception of both plays, and it is regrettable that we cannot answer it conclusively.

[1] See Finglass (2007) 1-4; also (2011) 1-11.

Nevertheless, whichever play preceded the other, it is usually more helpful to consider them both as alternative responses to Aeschylus' *Libation Bearers* of 458 BC rather than one responding to the other. For what it is worth, I am weakly inclined to place Euripides' play before Sophocles', because of the stylistic features that associate Sophocles' play with two other dramas first performed several years after the span of time within which Euripides' *Electra* is most likely to have fallen; and if that is correct, the issue of the reception of Sophocles by Euripides does not arise. Euripides' *Orestes*, produced in 408 when Sophocles had less than three years to live, probably does postdate Sophocles' *Electra*, but that play, despite featuring Electra as a major character, does not interact with Sophocles' *Electra* in particular as opposed to subverting the Orestes myth as a whole.

Whatever the exact date of its first performance, Sophocles' *Electra* is likely to have seen reperformances from shortly after its first production. The tradition of reperforming tragedies was well established by the last part of the 5th century;[2] Sophocles himself may have supervised reperformances of *Electra* at deme festivals after its première, which presumably took place in Athens. Depending on our definition of 'reception', the earliest instances of the reception of Sophocles' play may thus have been directed by Sophocles himself. Creative reworkings in such reperformances will have been inevitable, especially when Sophocles himself was no longer involved in them; plays were altered to suit new dramatic circumstances, for example by increasing the size of the main parts to fit the greater focus on the star actor seen in this period. Reperformance became a part of the greatest tragic festival, the Dionysia, in 386. We have the names of only a few of the plays reperformed there,

[2] For the early reperformance of tragedy see Finglass (2015a); (2015b); Lamari (2015).

and *Electra* is not among them, but it is entirely possible that it did see a reperformance there.

Thanks to an anecdote recorded by the Roman scholar Aulus Gellius, we know of at least one 4th-century performance of the play at Athens.[3] According to Gellius, the actor Polus of Aegina, active in the second half of the 4th century,[4] when performing the lead role in *Electra* at Athens, delivered that character's famous lament over the supposed ashes of Orestes while holding an urn containing the remains of his own child.[5] The moving story points to one reason why actors may have found *Electra* so conducive for repeated performance: its fixation on the character of Electra, who is on stage for a greater percentage of the play than any other Sophoclean character, and who has so many set piece moments that a talented actor could exploit to the full. Polus draws attention to the most affecting passage in Electra's role, and yet makes it even more emotional thanks to his choice of prop, setting up a complex intertwining between the worlds of fiction and of reality: a fascinating instance of an actor interacting with Sophocles' original material to fashion something new.

Polus is not the only great artiste associated with our play's protagonist. Theodorus, an actor "already wealthy enough by 362 to make a large contribution to the rebuilding of the temple of Apollo at Delphi",[6] is said by the fourth-century orator Demosthenes to have played Antigone,[7] but Electra too was in his repertoire, as we can infer from a story in Plutarch, a Greek writer in the late first to early second

[3] Aulus Gellius *Attic Nights* 6.5.

[4] Plutarch *Demosthenes* 28.3; cf. Philochorus *Fragmente der griechischen Historiker* 328 F 222.

[5] For Polus see Easterling (2002) 335-6; Holford-Strevens (1999) 238; (2005); Duncan (2005) 63-5.

[6] Hall (2007) 284 (with references and bibliography in n. 106).

[7] Demosthenes 19.246.

century AD.[8] Theodorus' wife is said to have denied him her favors while he was participating in some (presumably dramatic) competition; when he wins, she yields herself to him, declaring "Son of Agamemnon, now it is permitted for you [to see] these things", which is the first line of Sophocles' *Electra*,[9] and which forms a more satisfying conclusion if Theodorus is imagined to have performed the very play which his wife now chooses to cite.

Two references to *Electra* in our evidence for 4th-century actors may not seem much, but they are two more than we have for most plays; they permit the cautious inference that *Electra* was a reasonably popular drama for at least the century after Sophocles' death, since at least two of the leading actors of that period seem to have maintained that role within their repertoire. Moreover, they are supported by the evidence from 4th-century vase-painting, discussed in the next section.

After the 4th century we have no direct evidence for reperformance of Sophocles' *Electra*, and not many explicit references to the play. But the ones that we have are important. An anecdote in the 3rd century comic playwright and anecdotist Machon referring to the general and king Demetrius Poliorcetes (337–283 BC) has his mistress Mania use the first line of the play, as Theodorus' wife had done, in a sexually provocative sense; it can sometimes seem as if the early reception of *Electra* was located as much in the bedroom as on the stage.[10] But the play is found in more

[8] Plutarch *Quaestiones Convivales* 737ab. The inference is made by O'Connor (1908) 101; cf. Duncan (2005) 59-63.

[9] That is, line 2 in the modern numeration, since line [1] is probably spurious: see Finglass (2007) 90-2 (*ad loc.*).

[10] Machon lines 226-30, on which see McClure (2003) 93-4; again, "the first line" is the line that appears as line two in our editions (see previous note).

elevated contexts too. In the late 3rd century the epigrammatist Dioscorides names *Electra* as among Sophocles' best works:[11]

τύμβος ὅδ' ἔστ', ὤνθρωπε, Σοφοκλέος, ὃν παρὰ Μουσῶν
ἱρὴν παρθεσίην ἱερὸς ὢν ἔλαχον,
ὅς με τὸν ἐκ Φλιοῦντος ἔτι τρίβολον πατέοντα
πρίνινον ἐς χρύσεον σχῆμα μεθηρμόσατο
καὶ λεπτὴν ἐνέδυσεν ἁλουργίδα· τοῦ δὲ θανόντος
εὔθετον ὀρχηστὴν τῇδ' ἀνέπαυσα πόδα.
"ὄλβιος, ὡς ἀγαθὴν ἔλαχες στάσιν· ἡ δ' ἐνὶ χερσὶ
κούριμος, ἐκ ποίης ἥδε διδασκαλίης;"
εἴτε σοὶ Ἀντιγόνην εἰπεῖν φίλον οὐκ ἂν ἁμάρτοις
εἴτε καὶ Ἠλέκτραν· ἀμφότεραι γὰρ ἄκρον.

Passer-by, this is the tomb of Sophocles, whom I, consecrated to this task, received as a holy charge from the Muses. He it was who took me from Phlius when I was still treading the oaken threshing-sledge, and adapted me to a golden appearance, and clothed me in fine purple robes. And when he died, I stopped my deft dancing foot here. "Fortunate man, what a good place for stopping you have obtained. But the mask with shorn hair in your hands -- from which production does it come?" You would not be wrong if it was dear to you to say Antigone, or Electra, too; for both are first rate.

Dioscorides *Palatine Anthology* 7.37[12]

[11] For this epigram see Klooster (2011) 151-3; my translation is influenced by the commentary of Gow/Page (1965) II 254-5.

[12] Gow/Page (1965) ll. 1597-1606.

This explicit value judgment, made perhaps less than two centuries after Sophocles' death, is a remarkable testimony. Of all the plays that Dioscorides could have chosen, he selects two that turn out to be among the seven that survived antiquity complete. If we take 123 as the most likely number of plays written by Sophocles,[13] and assume that none had been lost by Dioscorides' time (a reasonable assumption), the chance of him selecting at random two plays from the seven which would be preserved in full is one in over 300. Such odds suggest that *Electra*, like *Antigone*, had already achieved the greater popularity that would facilitate its preservation when so many other plays were lost; that is consistent with the picture tentatively drawn above for the 4th century. That popularity is likely to have manifested itself in performances -- actors will have continued to feature speeches from the play in their repertoire, perhaps particularly the speech over the urn favored by Polus. Indeed, it is a performance which is envisaged by Dioscorides' epigram -- the final speaker is identifying not a play but a mask.[14] But these performances will have stimulated the production of copies for reading, copies which in their turn will have inspired the production of further performances by keeping the play before the eyes of the public.

A later epigrammatist, Statilius Flaccus, who "must have flourished not much if at all later than the first decade A.D.", also refers to Sophocles' *Electra* in the context of a poem praising the ability of its author:[15]

Οἰδίποδες δισσοί σε καὶ Ἠλέκτρη βαρύμηνις

[13] Sommerstein (2012) 192 argues that this is the most likely of the various figures that have come down to us.

[14] So rightly Nervegna (2014) 164-5.

[15] Statilius Flaccus *Palatine Anthology* 9.98 = 3821-6 *GP* (translation by Gow/Page; quotation from II 451); see Holford-Strevens (1999) 220.

καὶ δείπνοις ἐλαθεὶς Ἀτρέος Ἠέλιος

ἄλλα τε πουλυπαθέσσι, Σοφόκλεες, ἀμφὶ τυράννοις

ἄξια τῆς Βρομίου βύβλα χοροιτυπίης

ταγὸν ἐπὶ τραγικοῖο κατήνησαν θιάσοιο 5

αὐτοῖς ἡρώων φθεγξάμενον στόμασι.

Two plays on Oedipus, Electra's grievous wrath, the sun put to flight by the feast of Atreus, and other books worthy of Dionysus' choral dance about kings of manifold sufferings -- these have approved you, Sophocles, as leader of the Tragic company; you, who have spoken with your heroes' very lips.

The shorn mask representing Electra (or Antigone) in Dioscorides' epigram emphasised her status as a mourner, whose hair was cut as a sign of grief; her mourning is also to the fore in the anecdote concerning Polus and the urn. Statilius' characterisation of Electra as βαρύμηνις ("of grievous wrath") by contrast, emphasises her passionate hatred for her father's killers; her intense sorrow in the play is accompanied by a fury of which she herself is all too well aware, and it is notable that both these aspects of her characterisation are highlighted in the little that survives of the ancient reception of the drama. Sophocles' Electra is not, in ancient tradition, simply a stereotypical mourner.

Statilius' epigram lists four plays of Sophocles -- his *Oedipus Tyrannus*, *Oedipus at Colonus*, *Electra*, and *Atreus* or *Thyestes* -- and three come from the seven which happen to survive complete. Again, this suggests that these plays enjoyed a particular influence in antiquity, since the chance of this happening at random is one

in 2,500.[16] The probability of both these epigrams (and there are no others that name plays for us to take into account) ending up purely by chance with such a concentration of the plays which happened to survive complete is infinitesimal. These odds prove that the plays that survived antiquity were already enjoying particular popularity at an early period in their transmission. It is especially remarkable that *Electra* is named once more, the only drama which occurs both this list and that of Dioscorides; again, this fits the picture cautiously established above for the 4th century. So we can say with some confidence that *Electra* was one of the most popular plays of Sophocles (whether performed in its entirety or as extracts), and evidence for that popularity is apparent in the 4th and 3rd centuries BC and the 1st century AD. But whereas Dioscorides' epigram had referred to performance, Statilius' highlights books; this may be symptomatic of a gradual shift from appreciating the work as a play to be performed, in full or in extracts, to a book to be read -- though of course for most of antiquity the two were not mutually exclusive as forms of reception.

Latin literature sheds further light on the reception of Sophocles' *Electra*. The play had an impact on republican Latin tragedy,[17] as we can infer in the first instance from Pacuvius' *Dulorestes* ("Orestes the Slave") a drama dated between 200 and 140 BC. Our knowledge of that play is sparse, but the title indicates that Orestes returned home in the disguise of a slave; this aligns it with Sophocles' tragedy, even though there Orestes chooses a different means of concealing his identity.[18] The few

[16] I am grateful to Brendan Finglass for working this out for me.

[17] For the influence of Sophocles on this genre see Holford-Strevens (1999) 221-7; Nervegna (2014) 178.

[18] Aeschylus' *Libation Bearers* also features a disguised Orestes, but much less is made of the motif there, and in any case Aeschylus was much less popular than Sophocles in this period and so less likely

fragments contain a speech from one character threatening to imprison another, possibly delivered by Aegisthus to Electra; similar menaces are reported in Sophocles' play.[19] So too the statement from Orestes (or perhaps Electra) that (s/)he wishes to "grow like my mother in my character, so that I could avenge my father" may recall lines from Sophocles' play in which Electra associates her own shameful behavior with the φύσις [nature] inherited from her mother.[20] And a remark in which the speaker warns the addressee not to shame his/her age may have been delivered by Clytemnestra to Electra, just as in Sophocles' play Clytemnestra notes that Electra's words are inappropriate for her age.[21] Pacuvius was from Brundisium, and retired to Tarentum; these southern Italian connections (inherited from his uncle Ennius, who claimed to have three hearts, one Roman, one Greek, one Oscan) may account for his familiarity with Greek tragedy, since performance traditions in these Greek-speaking lands, already present in the 4th century as we know thanks to visual evidence, are likely to have remained strong.[22]

The *Electra* of Atilius, a drama perhaps from the same period as Pacuvius', was also influenced by Sophocles' play, as the Roman orator of the first century BC, Cicero, makes clear:

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to be a model ("there is no literary source confirming the Aeschylean paternity of any Roman tragedy": Nervegna (2014) 178).

[19] Pacuvius *Dulorestes* fr. 94 Schierl *nam te in tenebrica saepe lacerabo fame | clausam et fatigans artus torte distraham*; cf. Sophocles *Electra* 378-84.

[20] Pacuvius *Dulorestes* fr. 97 Schierl *utinam nunc matrescam ingenio, ut meum patrem ulcisci queam.*

[21] Pacuvius *Dulorestes* fr. 92 Schierl *primum hoc abs te oro: ni me inexorabilem | faxis, ni turpassis vanitudine aetatem tuam*; Sophocles *Electra* 612-14.

[22] See below. "Note the consistency between the pictorial record from South Italy and the Greek models used by Roman dramatists": Nervegna (2014) 178, with examples.

qui Ennii Medeam aut Antiopam Pacuvii spernat aut reiciat, quod se isdem Euripidis fabulis delectari dicat, Latinas litteras oderit? Synephebos ego, inquit, potius Caecilii aut Andriam Terentii quam utramque Menandri legam? a quibus tantum dissentio, ut, cum Sophocles vel optime scripserit Electram, tamen male conversam Atilii mihi legendam putem, de quo Lucilius: "ferreum scriptorem", verum, opinor, scriptorem tamen, ut legendus sit.

Who would despise or reject Ennius' *Medea* or Pacuvius' *Antiope*, on the grounds that he is delighted by the corresponding plays of Euripides, but detests Latin literature? Am I to read, he asks, Caecilius' *Young Comrades* or Terence's *Woman of Andros* rather than the same two comedies of Menander? I disagree with such people so strongly, that, although Sophocles wrote an outstanding *Electra*, I would nevertheless think that Atilius' poor translation was worth reading. Lucilius called him "an iron writer" -- but still a writer, in my view, so that he deserves to be read.

Cicero *On the ends of good and evil* 1.4-5

Verses from this very tragedy were recited at Julius Caesar's funeral to stir up the populace, as we learn from Svetonius:

inter ludos cantata sunt quaedam ad miserationem et invidiam caedis eius accommodata, ex Pacuvi Armorum iudicio: "men servasse, ut essent qui me perderent"? [fr. 31 Schierl] *et ex Electra Atili ad similem sententiam.*

Among the games verses were sung fit for inciting pity and jealousy, from Pacuvius' *Judgement of the Arms* the line "Did I save them, so that there would be men to destroy me?", and from the *Electra* of Atilius to the same effect.

Svetonius *The Deified Julius* 1.84.2

Thanks to Svetonius, we are confronted with the fascinating possibility that Sophocles' *Electra*, via Atilius' translation, had an impact on events at Rome in the pivotal year 44 BC. Certainly, Sophocles' play could be given a Caesarian slant in the right context, presenting as it does a great leader who had won a mighty victory abroad treacherously slain at home by someone who should have been closest to him. The Caesarian party, even deprived of their chief, had more resources to rely on than Agamemnon's did, of course -- an impartial assessment would hardly equate them with Electra. But it would have suited Caesar's successors to invoke Sophocles' portrayal of the children of Agamemnon: both Electra's profound expressions of grief, and the two siblings' passionate desire for vengeance.

Cicero's praise for Atilius' play and its delivery before the populace at Caesar's funeral suggest that it had a broad appeal, among intellectuals and the masses[23] -- we would dearly love to know exactly how it interacted with its Sophoclean original. Moreover, Cicero's positive assessment of Sophocles' *Electra* is a further testimonium to that play's reputation. It is Atilius' play whose virtue he wishes to highlight, but he makes no effort to do this by criticising the drama which was its model; the brilliance of Sophocles' play was too widely acknowledged.[24] Cicero's brother, Quintus, wrote an *Electra*, one of four tragedies that he composed in sixteen days;[25] we cannot say whether his model was Sophocles' or Euripides' play,

[23] Thus Nervegna (2014) 178.

[24] Contrast Cicero *Tusculan Disputations* 2.48-50, which compares Pacuvius' *Niptra* favorably to Sophocles' play of that name.

[25] Cicero *Letters to his brother Quintus* 3.5.7.

but the far greater popularity of the former in antiquity makes it more likely that Quintus was responding to Sophocles.

A generation or so after Cicero, the poet Propertius incorporated a reference to Sophocles' *Electra* at the start of one of his elegies:

Non ita Dardanio gavisus, Atrida, triumpho es,
cum caderent magnae Laomedontis opes;
[. . .]
nec sic Electra salvum cum aspexit Oresten
cuius falsa tenens fleverat ossa soror;
[. . .]
quanta ego praeterita collegi gaudia nocte:
immortalis ero si altera talis erit.

Son of Atreus, you did so not rejoice in his triumph when the great wealth of Laomedon was falling . . ., not did Electra, when she saw that Orestes was safe, whose supposed bones she had wept for as she held them . . ., to the extent of the joys that I experienced during the past night; I will be immortal, if there is another like it.

Propertius 2.14.1-10

Perhaps Propertius' reference to Electra holding the urn does not necessarily imply deep familiarity with Sophocles' play, since that episode might have been known even to people who had never seen or read the drama. Even if that is true, it is still important evidence for its popularity, or rather the popularity of a particular scene. But Propertius' words suggest an acquaintance with Sophocles' work that was more than skin-deep; the emphasis on intense joy mirrors the culmination and aftermath of the recognition scene in *Electra*, where the protagonist's happiness is vividly

described. This is not typical of such scenes in tragedy, where darker thoughts tend to intrude soon after the moment of recognition,[26] and so may indicate that Propertius was responding to Sophocles' play at first hand, and expecting at least some of his readers to do the same.

A further work of Latin literature that alludes to Sophocles' *Electra* is the anonymous *Octavia* ascribed to the first century AD playwright and philosopher Seneca.[27] Octavia's entry at the start of that play "to set her own grief against the background of nature reviving for the toils of the day" recalls the opening scene of Sophocles' play; "the parallel carries the implication that Octavia, like her Greek counterpart, can find no comfort in the quiet of the night, so great is the bereavement consequent upon the destruction of her whole family".[28] The exchange between Clytemnestra and Electra towards the end of Seneca's *Agamemnon* (953-77) might also show Sophoclean influence, although it is no mere copy of the earlier play; "in Sophocles both women are flawed and vulnerable, and their relationship is shown to be mutually degrading; Seneca's Electra is a blameless heroine who defied with wit and courage a hysterical adulteress".[29] In such cases it is hard to determine whether the later author is purposefully adapting a scene that some of his readers will recognize, or whether he has hit upon a similar type of episode by chance and no relationship is at issue.

The second century AD satirist Lucian also refers to a scene from our play, as follows:

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[26] See Finglass (2007) 470-1 (on 1232-87).

[27] See Lader (1909).

[28] Ferri (2003) 121, 119.

[29] Tarrant (1976) 351 (on 953ff.); on possible similarities in lines 7-11 he comments that "Seneca derives nothing essential from Sophocles, and the resemblances may be due to simple coincidence".

ἑξῆς δὲ μετὰ τήνδε τὴν εἰκόνα ἕτερον δρᾶμα γέγραπται δικαιότατον, οὗ τὸ ἀρχέτυπον ὁ γραφεὺς παρ᾽ Εὐριπίδου ἢ Σοφοκλέους δοκεῖ μοι λαβεῖν· ἐκεῖνοι γὰρ ὁμοίαν ἔγραψαν τὴν εἰκόνα. τὼ νεανία τὼ ἑταίρω Πυλάδης τε ὁ Φωκεὺς καὶ Ὀρέστης δοκῶν ἤδη τεθνάναι λαθόντ᾽ ἐς τὰ βασίλεια παρελθόντε φονεύουσιν ἄμφω τὸν Αἴγισθον· ἡ δὲ Κλυταιμνήστρα ἤδη ἀνῄρηται καὶ ἐπ᾽ εὐνῆς τινος ἡμίγυμνος πρόκειται καὶ θεραπεία πᾶσα, ἐκπεπληγμένοι τὸ ἔργον οἱ μὲν ὥσπερ βοῶσιν, οἱ δέ τινες ὅπῃ φύγωσι περιβλέπουσι. σεμνὸν δέ τι ὁ γραφεὺς ἐπενόησεν, τὸ μὲν ἀσεβὲς τῆς ἐπιχειρήσεως δείξας μόνον καὶ ὡς ἤδη πεπραγμένον παραδραμών, ἐμβραδύνοντας δὲ τοὺς νεανίσκους ἐργασάμενος τῷ τοῦ μοιχοῦ φόνῳ.

Lucian 10.23

Straight after this picture another most righteous drama is represented, whose model the artist seems to me to have taken from Euripides or Sophocles, since they portrayed a similar picture. The two young companions, Pylades the Phocian and Orestes, who is thought already to have died, have secretly entered the palace and are both slaying Aegisthus. Clytemnestra has already been killed and is lying half-naked on a bed; as for the servants, stunned at the deed, some are shouting, while others are looking for a place to flee. The artist's conception is a noble one, merely sketching the impiety of the undertaking and passing over it as something already accomplished, and depicting the young men as taking their time over the killing of the adulterer.

Although the speaker says that the scene could be taken from Euripides or Sophocles, in fact it must refer to the latter's play, since only there is Clytemnestra killed before Aegisthus. The speaker's confusion probably reflects the greater popularity of Euripides in this period, so a scene from Sophocles, even from a popular play like his *Electra*, might nevertheless be wrongly attributed to him. The reference to the picture "merely sketching the impiety of the undertaking" is arguably also a response to

Sophocles' play, where the portrayal of the matricide is grim but brief, and the emphasis falls rather on the great moment of recognition between the siblings, and, to a lesser extent, on the entrapment of Aegisthus; both Aeschylus' and Euripides' dramas, by contrast, place far more emphasis on Clytemnestra's death. The description of the painting may suggest that this scene was in fact depicted in ancient art. Certainly, it was in the 18th and 19th centuries, and the inspiration for those later paintings may even have come not just from Sophocles' play, but also from Lucian's description here.[30]

Evidence for the popularity of Sophocles' play can also be discerned from the ancient manuscripts that contain texts of the drama, fragments of which have been preserved in Egypt, and which provide physical testimony to countless acts of reception by readers, students, and performers. In the distribution of Sophoclean papyri as a whole, "there is nothing to suggest that, before AD 100, any group of plays was being read, performed, and copied . . . more than any other".[31] The picture for Euripides is different, in that "the plays of the Selection [i.e. the plays which survived into the modern period in more than a single manuscript] are somewhat overrepresented even among the papyri from the 3rd to 2nd centuries BC, and by the 2nd to 1st centuries BC both the Selection in general, and the Triad in particular [i.e. the three plays which in the Byzantine period are represented in the most manuscripts], make up a decisive preponderance of the attested texts."[32] But Euripides

[30] See below; thus Hall (1999) 280.

[31] Finglass (2012) 13. A number of instances of "AD" in my typescript have been rendered as "BCE" (sic) in the published text; I have cited above the text as it should be written. The claim above is based, however, on a sample of merely six papyri for the relevant period, of which one is from the seven plays that survived; the picture could change if we had only a few more fragments.

[32] Finglass (2017a).

is far better represented than Sophocles among the papyri, and so we are in a better position to discern trends in the popularity of his plays and to draw more reliable inferences from the data.

Two fragments survive of ancient manuscripts of Sophocles' *Electra*. One, *P.Oxy. 693*, from a papyrus codex, dates to the first half of the 3rd century.[33] The other, *P.Ant. 72*, from a parchment codex, dates to the 6th or 7th century.[34] As their names indicate, the two fragments come from different towns: from Oxyrhynchus, a town approximately 160 kilometres south-west of modern Cairo, the source of most of the ancient manuscripts that have come down to us, and from Antinopolis, a little further down the Nile. These fragments do not make *Electra* particularly well represented compared to the other six surviving plays: *Ajax* and *Oedipus the King* have four each, and there are three of *Trachinian Women*, and two each of *Antigone*, *Philoctetes*, and *Oedipus at Colonus*.[35] But they are evidence that people in Egypt were reading and responding to the play well after the end of antiquity. Our evidence thus allows us to trace the pre-Mediaeval reception of the drama from the 4th century BC down to the 7th century AD, using a variety of different means. Complete performances of the play are not likely to have taken place after the start of the 3rd century AD at the very latest, and may have ceased some time before; the performance of extracts is likely to have been more common.[36] The papyri in

[33] This papyrus, published by Grenfell/Hunt (1904), contains lines 993-1007, and is now to be found in the Manuscripts Division, Department of Rare Books and Special Collections, Princeton University Library, AM 4423.

[34] This papyrus, published by Barns (1960), contains lines 16-24, and is now to be found in the Sackler Library, University of Oxford.

[35] For papyri of the seven surviving plays of Sophocles see Finglass (2013); (2017a).

[36] For reperformance of tragedy in this period see Finglass (2014a) 77-9.

particular are evidence for a continued readership, perhaps especially in the context of schools.

Euripides' *Electra*, by contrast, has only one surviving papyrus, from the 3rd century AD. There is nothing to suggest that it was especially popular among the plays of Euripides; there is no statement from an epigrammatist saying that *Electra* was among Euripides' finest dramas, no evidence that it was prominent in the acting repertoire. And whereas normally the fact that a play survived antiquity means that it must have enjoyed at least a certain reputation, in this instance that is not the case. Euripides' *Electra* is one of nine plays found in a single mediaeval manuscript, all of which begin with a small alphabetic range of letters, which strongly suggests that they descend from the chance survival of a single volume of a multi-volume edition arranged in rough alphabetical order of the play titles.[37] Sophocles' play, not Euripides', was the *Electra* that dominated antiquity, a noteworthy point given that in the ancient world after the 5th century, Euripides' works generally enjoyed greater popularity than his.

In the Byzantine period, the popularity of Sophocles' *Electra* was maintained: there are dozens of manuscripts of the play, and only *Ajax* has more. There was no performance tradition during this period; the manuscripts reflect the use of this play in the Byzantine classroom, where it must have been familiar to countless schoolboys.[38] The earliest manuscripts of the play that we possess, *Laurentianus* 32.9 (L) and *Lugdunensis Batavorum BPG* 60A (Λ), were written in about AD 950; the latter subsequently had another text written on top of the text of Sophocles, but it is nevertheless possible to read some of what lies underneath. The next oldest

[37] See Finglass (2017b).

[38] See Easterling (2013).

manuscript, *Laurentianus* 31.10 (K), dates to the second half of the twelfth century. The other manuscripts come from after the reestablishment of the Byzantine Empire by the Palaeologan dynasty in 1259, reflecting the flourishing of scholarship that took place during this period and the greater demand for texts that this produced. Most of these manuscripts are likely to have been written at Constantinople, given the status of that city as a cultural centre; but at least one, *Laurentianus conventi soppresi* 152 (G), which dates to 1282, is known to have been written in south Italy, which remained Greek speaking centuries after the end of Byzantine hegemony in the region. The reception of Sophocles' *Electra* in this period is thus not simply limited to the territory of the Byzantine empire.

As the threat posed by the Turks grew more pressing, manuscripts began to be exported to the west. This process began well before the capture of Constantinople in 1453. So the first Sophoclean manuscript known to have been brought to Italy from the Byzantine empire arrived in 1413, delivered by the humanist Giovanni Aurispa to the Chancellor of Florence; the book, written in the 14th century, is still in that city.[39] Ten years later Aurispa brought to Florence the most precious Sophoclean manuscript of all, *Laurentianus* 32.9 (L), which is, as we have seen, the oldest that has survived complete. The arrival of these books almost coincided with the invention of the printing press, and in time the first printed edition of Sophocles' plays, including *Electra*, appeared in 1502. Euripides' *Electra*, by contrast, was not published until 1546, well after the rest of his surviving plays, which appeared in print in 1494 and 1503. So for almost the first half of the century, the only *Electra* play easily accessible to the (Greek-)reading public was that of Sophocles.

[39] *Laurentianus conventi soppresi* 71; see Easterling (2003) 321.

The earliest vernacular translations of Sophocles' *Electra* were those of Lazare de Baïf (1496–1547), French ambassador to Venice, in French (*Tragedie de Sophoclés intitulee Electra, contenant la vengence de l'inhumaine et trespiteuse mort d'Agamemnon roy de Mycenes la grand, faicte par sa femme Clytemnestra, et son adultere Egistus. Ladicte Tragedie traduicte du grec dudit Sophoclés en rythme Françoyse, ligne pour ligne, et vers pour vers: en faveur et commodité des amateurs de l'une et l'autre langue*, 1537; "Tragedy of Sophocles entitled Electra, containing the avenging on the inhuman and most piteous death of Agamemnon king of great Mycenae, committed by his wife Clytemnestra and her adulterous lover Aegisthus. The aforementioned tragedy translated from the Greek of Sophocles in French rhythm, line for line, and verse for verse: for the favour and convenience of amateurs in oone and the other language") and Péter Bornemisza (*c.* 1535 – 1584, later a Lutheran bishop) in Hungarian (*Elektra*, often known as *Magyar Elektra*, 1558).[40] As suits an ambassador of the state, Lazare de Baïf gives to his translation a dedication to the French monarch and a title that emphasises the immorality of Agamemnon's death; his translation keeps fairly close to the Greek. Bornemisza's play was intended for performance; produced at Vienna where Bornemisza was a student, it adapts Sophocles' play in various ways. So the prayers in the drama take on an overtly Christian, even Protestant, tone; "perhaps . . . this thorough Christianisation was necessary in order to create an illusion of immediacy for the audience, reminding them that while this tale was about a Greek royal family, the same things could happen anywhere at any time; that the tale had wider moral implications."[41]

[40] For the former play see Fassina (2012); Saint Martin (2012a); Saint Martin (2012b) (on this and later French translations); Karsenti (2012) 159-63; for the latter, Gömöri (1982) = (2013) 1-9.

[41] Gömöri (1982) 19 = (2013) 4.

Bornemisza himself emphasises the drama's political aspect, saying in his introduction "Consider this play, my lords, to be such an entertainment in which . . . human life is put right, in which you shall see how terribly the powerful King and Queen of Greece have to pay for their heinous crimes, from which all kings, lords, great ones as well as small ones can take a lesson and a great example that God has the power to avenge".[42] Whereas the title of Lazare de Baïf's translation emphasises the evil act committed by the usurpers of Agamemnon's throne, Bornemisza sees in the play a warning to all monarchs about wrongdoing more generally. This stress on morality in general is picked up at the end of the work, where Bornemisza inserts a concluding moral delivered by Orestes' Paedagogus.

The earliest English translation was by Christopher Wase, an English scholar and teacher (1627-1690), published in 1649 under the title *Electra of Sophocles: Presented to her Highnesse the Lady Elizabeth; With an Epilogue, Shewing the Parallel in two Poems, The Return, and The Restauration*.[43] The Lady Elizabeth in question, a daughter of King Charles I, was imprisoned on the Isle of Wight after her father's execution. Wase's translation is explicitly motivated by political considerations; Elizabeth corresponds to Electra, her father to the dead Agamemnon. Seventeen hundred years after a Latin translation of Sophocles' *Electra* was used to stir up the crowd against the killers of an absolutist monarch, so now an English translation of the same play is put to a similar use. The comparison is especially

[42] Translated by Gömöri (1982) 20 ≈ (2013) 5.

[43] See Hall (1999) 264-9; Clare (2002) 20-1; Hall/Macintosh (2005) 163-5. Before that, Thomas Goffe's *The Tragedie of Orestes* (performed at Oxford between 1609 and 1619), although not based on Sophocles' *Electra*, nevertheless draws on it for (e.g.) the Messenger's false account of Orestes' death, and even refers to its performance history; Orestes mentions the story of Polus and the urn as he himself handles the skull of his father (thus Hall (1999) 263-4; cf. Hall/Macintosh (2005) 163).

fascinating given the potential parallels to be drawn between the assassination of Caesar and the execution of Charles.[44] But it also demonstrates the versatility of Sophocles' drama, its capacity to act as a parallel for historical situations centuries apart.

A recent translation intended for performance was published by the Canadian poet and classicist Anne Carson (1950–) in 2001. Carson's fame as a poet means that Sophocles' *Electra* is probably better known today through her work than that of anyone else. An analysis of one passage, chosen at random, serves to bring out the qualities of her work:

Χο. οἰκτρὰ μὲν νόστοις αὐδά,
οἰκτρὰ δ' ἐν κοίταις πατρῴαις,
ὅτε οἱ παγχάλκων ἀνταία
γενύων ὡρμάθη πλαγά.
δόλος ἦν ὁ φράσας, ἔρος ὁ κτείνας,
δεινὰν δεινῶς προφυτεύσαντες
μορφάν, εἴτ' οὖν θεὸς εἴτε βροτῶν
ἦν ὁ ταῦτα πράσσων.

One rawblood cry
on the day he returned,
one rawblood cry went through the halls
just as the axeblade

[44] According to Biskup (2009) 401, "after 1660, propagandists of the Stuart dynasty . . . built on the parallels between Caesar's death and the execution of Charles I"; but the sole reference that he cites to support this leads to a discussion of Augustus in the 17th century.

rose

and fell.

He was caught by guile,

cut down by lust:

together they bred a thing shaped like a monster --

god or mortal

no one knows.

Carson's powerful language certainly captures the forceful spirit of the chorus's words. Sophocles' repeated οἰκτρά becomes Carson's repeated "rawblood"; but where Sophocles had emphasised the pitiable nature of Agamemnon's cry, the feeling of sympathy for the dead man that it created, Carson highlights instead the goriness of the act. Sophocles' reference to the killing taking place ἐν κοίταις πατρῴαις "at your father's couch", emphasising the easy domesticity of the scene of the homicide, is omitted by Carson, whose reference to "the halls" evokes a more formal setting. At the end of the passage, Carson's text leads the reader to think that it is the monster whose status as a "god or mortal" is unknown; Sophocles, by contrast, applies this phrase to person "who did these things", referring to the actions just described. If we are looking for a reasonably accurate rendering of Sophocles' text, this translation will hardly satisfy -- taking a nominative as an accusative is rarely recommended practice. As one reviewer commented, Carson "creates an intense and emotionally charged atmosphere, but much of Sophocles' style, vocabulary, and imagery is lost in the process. For me there is too much Carson and too little Sophocles."[45] But as a retelling of Sophocles' play, as a poet's response to, rather than translation of, the

[45] Steinmeyer (2009).

ancient drama, Carson's work can be appreciated for the remarkable new creation that it is.

In Fine Arts

Visual Arts

The earliest possible evidence for the reception of Sophocles' *Electra* in the visual arts is found in a *hydria* (a vase for carrying water) from Lucania in Magna Graecia, dating to between 400 and 380 BC.[46] That vase shows a woman holding an urn; a man is sitting nearby, beside a pillar inscribed with the name ΟΡΕΣΤΑΣ. The woman must be Electra, the man Orestes. This is hardly an exact replica of the scene in Sophocles' *Electra* in which Electra delivers her lament over the urn. But this was an incident unique to Sophocles' version of the myth, and one which, as we have already seen (and might have expected anyway), was particularly appreciated during the 4th century. It would be quite a coincidence if an artist had hit upon this particular depiction even though he had no familiarity with Sophocles' play, or at least with this scene. Nor should we expect a visual depiction to correspond exactly to what was in the play.[47] The pillar inscribed with Orestes' name must represent his tomb, something that Electra has not yet had time to construct during the timeframe of Sophocles' drama. But by including the pillar, the artist points out to the viewer that Orestes is believed to be dead -- something that the play has already established by this point through the words of the characters, but which a vase-painter must indicate

[46] London, British Museum F92, McPhee (1986) §47; discussed by Taplin (2007) 96-7. For vases inspired by Sophoclean plays see also Wright (2012) 586.

[47] For the inevitable differences between a work of literature and a work of art that purports to illustrate it see Finglass (2014b).

by other means. The position of the pillar is significant, directly under the urn held by the woman who must be Electra: aligned as they are on the vertical, neither in fact contains the ashes of the man whose death they assert. Meanwhile, Electra and Orestes are on either side of this vertical line, facing each other in a silent if meaningful interaction. We can be fairly confident in seeing here an instance of the reception of Sophocles' play, which was therefore known in Magna Graecia no later than the early 4th century BC, quite possibly less than a generation after its first performance in Athens.

A generation later, a Lucanian bell-krater (vase for mixing water and wine) from between 360 and 340 attributed to the Sydney painter provides further evidence for the reception of Sophocles' *Electra*, or at least of a particular scene within it, in the visual arts in Magna Graecia.[48] Two young men on the left stand and face a young woman on the right; the young man closest to the woman holds out an urn to her, as she responds with "a gesture that seems to suggest anxiety".[49] This probably evokes the moment in Sophocles' play where the urn is presented to Electra, who believes that it contains the ashes of her brother. The artist envisaged that people looking at the vase would be reminded of this particular play; the image does not make much sense without this additional knowledge. So both the possible instances of reception of the play in the visual arts from this period in Magna Graecia refer to the same scene, a scene which, as noted above, we have reason to think was especially popular in the acting repertoire during this period. Actors and painters naturally turned to this emotional high point in the drama.

[48] Vienna, Kunsthistorisches Museum IV 689 = McPhee (1986) §48; see Taplin (2007) 96-7.

[49] Taplin (2007) 97.

Another early 4th-century vase, it has recently been argued, may also show the influence of Sophocles' play. An Attic red-figure pelike dated to the 380s BC depicts several figures gathered round the tomb of Agamemnon, three of whom are labelled: Orestes (cutting off a lock of his hair), Electra (holding a hydria), and Ismene, the last an obvious error for Chrysothemis.[50] Chrysothemis' visit to the tomb, albeit not in the company of her siblings, is something attested only in Sophocles' play, and unlikely to have formed part of some other version of the myth now lost to us. Hence in the mind of people looking at it the image may well have evoked, and may well have been intended to evoke, Sophocles' *Electra*. Orestes' cutting of his lock might point to its discovery by Chrysothemis at the tomb in Sophocles' play; and Electra's carrying of a hydria might point to the centrality of the urn supposedly containing Orestes' ashes in the same work. If there is a connection with Sophocles, the discovery of the vase in Cyrenaica might indicate performance of Sophocles' play in this region, although such an inference would be highly speculative; we cannot be sure that the vase was painted with a Cyrenean audience in mind.

Three gems from ca. 400 BC to the 3rd century BC, one showing a woman sitting on a grave next to a funerary vessel, another a woman sitting on an urn in a mourning posture, and another a young man meeting a woman beside a grave, have been associated with our play. The iconographic type shows some similarities to 4th-century images of Electra on vases, and it has been suggested that this kind of image appearing on a gem evokes specifically the passage in Sophocles' *Electra* where Orestes, to confirm that he is indeed Electra's brother, shows her his father's seal or

[50] University of Exeter, unnumbered = Dennert (2009) §1 (which replaces the inaccurate entry that is McPhee (1986) §1); see Coo (2013).

σφραγίς.[51] The link is intriguing but not as satisfactory as for the vases discussed above; the seal is hardly a prominent part of Sophocles' drama, dismissed as it is in a line, and we may wonder whether any viewer of these objects would have been reminded of that particular passage. More convincing evidence for an artistic representation of the play is found in Lucian, whose description of a picture of the discovery of Clytemnestra's body may well reflect actual paintings of that particular scene.[52]

In the modern period, most artistic depictions of Electra are not specifically linked to Sophocles' play, or indeed to Euripides' *Electra* or Aeschylus' *Libation Bearers*: Electra appears in paintings as a standard figure of Greek myth, without specific associations with a particular ancient Greek text. There are exceptions, however. The British draughtsman and sculptor John Flaxman (1755-1826) produced a sketch, which he left unfinished, of the encounter of Orestes and Electra in what was supposed to be part of a series of illustrations of the plays of Sophocles, a project that he abandoned.[53] In this picture Electra is gripping a tripod, presumably a funerary monument, in evident pain; Orestes appears to be addressing her. The funerary monument can only be Agamemnon's tomb, which lies offstage in Sophocles' play; the encounter between the siblings in the drama takes place in front of the palace. But as with the Lucanian crater above, we should not fault the artist for including the tomb, forming as it does an effective visual shorthand to indicate to the viewer the

[51] Sophocles *Electra* 1222-3. Thus Moreno (2008) 429: "our three gems are undeniably informed and enriched by Sophocles' particular treatment of the Electran *anagnôrisis*, effectively recognition through a gem, and this arguably forms the strongest link to the play."

[52] See the discussion in the previous section.

[53] For Flaxman (and Kauffmann, discussed below) see Bakogianni (2009), which contains images; this article is summarised at Bakogianni (2011) 209-11.

key fact, the death of their father, that has affected the lives of his two children so profoundly and brought them to this dramatic moment.

A painting by the Swiss artist Angelika Kauffman (1741-1807) entitled *Electra giving her sister Chrysothemis her girdle and a lock of hair from Orestes for the grave of Agamemnon* depicts exactly what its title suggests. Chrysothemis plays no role in Aeschylus' or Euripides' versions of the myth, and this very action is depicted in Sophocles' play. Kauffman makes the lock of hair Orestes'; this may result from a conflation with Aeschylus' *Libation Bearers*, where Electra finds a lock at the tomb which turns out to be Orestes', or with a later passage in Sophocles' *Electra*, when Chrysothemis returns from the tomb having discovered a lock which she correctly infers to belong to their brother. Such conflation could result from a simple mistake on the part of the artist, or else because "Kauffman wanted to stress the cooperation of all three siblings and their desire to honour their father".[54]

A painting from 1763 by the Anglo-American artist Benjamin West (1738-1820), depicted, as its title indicates, the moment when "Aegisthus discovers the body of Clytemnestra", an image that specifically evokes the final scene of Sophocles' play; in other treatments of the story, including those of Aeschylus and Euripides, Aegisthus is the first to be killed. The painting is now lost, but was copied in a mezzotint by Valentine Green in 1786.[55] The same incident, which, as we saw above, was described by Lucian as the subject of an ancient painting, provided the material for the painting by the Swiss arist Henry Fuseli (1741-1825) "Orestes and Pylades forcing Aegisthus to see Clytemnestra's body", dated to *c.* 1776-8.[56] Whereas West's

[54] Bakogianni (2011) 210.

[55] See Hall/Macintosh (2005) 178 or Pop (2015) 40 for a reproduction.

[56] See Pop (2015) 39-43.

painting focused on the disconcerted Aegisthus, leaving Clytemnestra's body mostly unseen, Fuseli makes her grotesque uncovered corpse the centre of attention, emphasising the horror of the matricide in a manner true to the spirit, if not the letter, of the final part of Sophocles' play. The same subject remained popular, providing a theme for the Prix de Rome in 1823.[57]

Music and Dance

The *Electra* of 1787 by Johann Christian Friedrich Haeffner (1759-1833), with libretto by Nicolas-François Guillard (1752-1814) translated into Swedish by Adolf Fredrik Ristell (1744-1829), is based on Sophocles' play, but shows an Electra considerably weaker in character than her Sophoclean counterpart.[58] In Haeffner, Electra "does not share her classical predecessor's strength of will and determination. When she hears the news of Orest's supposed death she collapses in a faint in her sister's arms rather than plotting revenge . . . She fits the eighteenth-century conception of womanhood as weak and in need of male protection . . . Her exit at the end of the opera in a faint being carried away as Orest faces the Furies is symbolic of her portrayal".[59] A more forceful operatic portrayal of the Sophoclean Electra would have to wait until the early twentieth century.

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[57] Hall (1999) 281 ("Egisthe, croyant retrouver le corps d'Oreste mort, découvre celui de Clytemnestre" – "Aegisthus, believing that he is finding the body of the dead Orestes, discovers that of Clytemnestra"; the previous year the subject was "Oreste et Pylade" – "Orestes and Pylades", from the same myth, but not distinctively Sophoclean).

[58] Bakogianni (2011) 82-6.

[59] Bakogianni (2011) 83, 84, 86.

The *Elektra* by the Austrian writer Hugo von Hofmannsthal (1874-1929), a stage adaptation of Sophocles' drama, was staged in 1903.[60] Three years later, there followed an opera, *Electra*, by the German composer Richard Strauss (1864-1949), for which Hofmannsthal contributed the libretto.[61] A cartoon published in 1908 by the scenic designer and cartoonist Ernst Stern (1876-1954) shows Strauss and Hofmannsthal doing to Sophocles what, in the original play, Orestes and Pylades do to Clytemnestra -- indeed, the former pair are if anything even more barbaric, with Sophocles presented as a defenceless old man and Hofmannsthal even attempting to gouge his eyes out.[62] Yet "the forces that [the] opera unleashes are all implicit in Sophocles' original *Electra*".[63] As an adaptation, one scholar has called it, perhaps with exaggeration, "so free that it barely qualifies as a 'version' of Sophocles. There is no Tutor, no reported chariot race, no urn even, no recognition of Clytaemestra's body as Orestes and Electra play their cat-and-mouse game with Aegisthus"[64]. But there is a single-minded focus on Electra and her lust for revenge. She meets in succession both Chrysothemis and Clytemnestra, as in Sophocles; the latter confides in Electra the news of her terrible dreams (unlike in Sophocles, where Electra learns of the dream from Chrysothemis and Clytemnestra mentions it only in her prayer to Apollo, not in her debate with Electra), and her ignorance concerning how to appease

[60] For the play see Lloyd (2005) 123-7; Horn (2008) 159-82.

[61] For Strauss's opera see Lloyd (2005) 127-30; Ewans (2007) 81-103; Goldhill/Hall (2009a) 7-10.

[62] It can be found at Ewans (2007) ii.

[63] Ewans (2007) 82.

[64] McDonald (2012) 658. In fact Orestes' tutor (~ the Paedagogus) does appear, briefly, towards the end of the play to urge Orestes to kill Clytemnestra; and although no chariot race is narrated, Orestes is said to have been killed by being dragged by his own horses. Both these elements align the play more closely with Sophocles' original than McDonald's words might indicate.

the gods. Electra counters that the victim that the gods demand is Clytemnestra herself. She is indeed later killed by Orestes, who arrives after false news of his death. But after Aegisthus dies, lured as in Sophocles to the house through his belief that Orestes is dead, Electra herself perishes after an ecstatic dance; and as Chrysothemis (who is present in this final scene, unlike in Sophocles) calls for her brother inside the house, she receives no reply, at which point the opera ends.

The frantic figure who dominates the work is emphatically the Electra of Sophocles: "the Electra of Aeschylus' *Libation Bearers* could not have provided an adequate prototype for this self-obsessed diva . . . Euripides' more vigorous diva, who ultimately orchestrates her mother's murder, might have made a suitable model, but she lacks the fierce independence of Sophocles' heroine."[65] The absence of a chorus affects the mood of the play, since in Sophocles' drama it "has a complex relation of support for the heroine, and it continues to bolster her throughout. By removing the chorus altogether, Hofmannstahl focuses our attention on the raw individuality and fragility of the heroine, as she enters the conflict with her mother and her misery and triumph of revenge, without any prop or stay of female support".[66] But overall it is striking (especially given the furore at the time, with many people regarding the work as a travesty of Sophocles) how closely the work follows Sophocles' plot, even if some important details are changed. And more than a century on, scholars have proved much more sympathetic in regarding the work as something genuinely Sophoclean in spirit, even if it neglects certain aspects of the play to emphasise others, in particular the darker side of Electra's character. The opera has become a

[65] Anderson (2012) 603.

[66] Goldhill (2012) 197. Perhaps the chorus is not removed altogther, in that the opera opens with serving girls who comment on Electra's plight; but their part is a brief one.

mainstay of the repertoire, one of the best known of all the artistic creations fashioned in response to Sophocles' play.

A more recent but less well-known opera *Electra* (1992-3, premièred in Luxembourg in 1995) by the Greek composer Mikis Theodorakis (1925–), with libretto by Spyros Evangelatos, based on a translation of Sophocles' play by K. Yorgousopoulos; [67] Theodorakis had previously composed the music for Cacoyiannis's film *Electra* (discussed below). His opera stays much closer to Sophocles' text than did Strauss's or Haeffner's; to date, however, it has not found the fame enjoyed by the former.

On Stage and On Screen

Stage

1714 saw two English translations of the play: one anonymous, the other by the editor and author Lewis Theobald (1688-1744);[68] further translations followed by the scholars George Adams (*c.* 1698-1768) in 1729 and Thomas Francklin (1721-1784) in 1759.[69] In 1762 the playwright and merchant William Shirley (who flourished 1739-1777) was refused permission to have his *Electra* produced at Covent Garden.[70] Shirley published his translation *Electra, a Tragedy; and the Birth of Hercules, a Masque* in 1765, claiming that he had completed the work in 1744 but held it back on

[67] For this opera see Holst-Warhaft (2001) 208-16, Brown (2004) 295, Bakogianni (2011) 110-16.

[68] See Hall (1999) 269.

[69] For a list of translations of *Electra* into English see Walton (2006) 221-3, 214-17, although delete Cropp 1988 from the list (a translation of Euripides' play). Walton (2012) 627-32 offers a comparison of translations for a couple of passages.

[70] For such censorship see Macintosh (1995), especially pp. 58-9 on this play.

hearing of the Jacobite rebellion in 1745; if the play was performed in that context, it might have seemed that Shirley was attacking the then king, the Hannoverian George II, and sympathising with the rebellion of Charles Stuart (to the Jacobites, King Charles III) which in that year made its way as far south as Derby. But Shirley's political sympathies were with the Whigs, which aligned him not with the House of Stuart, but with the opposition to the new Tory ministry of Lord Bute and to the new king, George III, who had rejected the Whig politicians who had held sway under his grandfather, George II.[71] In Shirley's hands, the story of Sophocles' *Electra* becomes a "vitriolic Whig attack on Bute's regime",[72] in which the people rebel against the tyrannical rule of Aegisthus, who is assimilated to Bute; and it may be that, rather than any fear of Jacobite sympathies, which led to its being kept off the London stage.

Sophocles' *Electra* was repeatedly translated and adapted during this period in France,[73] although the absence of a chorus in the French dramatic tradition presented adaptors of this play with a problem, given that in Sophocles the opening focus on Electra is established by means of her exchanges with the chorus, who remain her partisans throughout.[74] An early *Electre* produced by the playwright Jacques Pradon (1632-1698) in 1677 was never published, and its text is lost. Translated by the scholar André Dacier (1651-1722) in 1692,[75] an *Electre* was then adapted for performance at Versailles by the playwright Hilaire-Bernard de Longepierre (1659-1731) in 1702. An *Electre* by the playwright Prosper Jolyot de Crébillon (1674-1762) was first performed in 1708 at the Comédie Française, and frequently revived later in

[71] Thus Hall (1999) 271-5; Hall/Macintosh (2005) 166-9.

[72] Hall (1999) 275.

[73] On these plays see Dudouyt (2013) 204-15.

[74] Thus Dudouyt (2013) 208-10.

[75] For Dacier's translation see Karsenti (2012) 165-70.

the century. Crébillon's play introduced romantic elements not present in Sophocles' drama -- his Electra is in love with Aegisthus' son Itys, his Orestes with Aegisthus' daughter Iphianasse -- with all the complications that this brings. Despite their unSophoclean origins, both these additional characters have names that occur in Sophocles' play (see ll. 148, 157-8), although not there as the children of Aegisthus; Sophocles' play also refers to Aegisthus' having children by Clytemnestra (ll. 589-90), but the children in Crébillon's drama are his offspring from a previous relationship.

The adaptation by the philosopher and author Voltaire (1694-1778), *Oreste* (published 1749, first performed 1750), includes a daring adaptation of the urn scene which so dominates Sophocles' play.[76] In Voltaire's drama, this vessel contains the ashes of Aegisthus' son Plistène, whom the tyrant had sent to kill Orestes and had ended up meeting his own end at the hands of his intended victim. So as well as wrongly lamenting her living brother, Electra erroneously laments over the ashes of her enemy; and the irony is heightened when Aegisthus enters and gloats over what he thinks are the remains of his foe, but are in fact those of his son. As well as adding extra (perhaps unwelcome, to our tastes) levels of irony to the use of the prop, Voltaire's addition also gestures to the well-known story of Polus' lament over the vessel: an actor's mourning for his son's ashes becomes a character's rejoicing over ashes that he does not realise belong to his son. Aegisthus' expressions of glee over his dead child also recalls the final scene of Sophocles' play, where he eagerly anticipates seeing the dead body of Orestes only to encounter the corpse of his wife. So this episode can be seen as both an elaboration of Sophocles' original and a sophisticated gesture to its performance history.

[76] See Jebb (1894) lix-lxii; Lloyd (2005) 122-3; Dudouyt (2013) 211-12,.

Voltaire also gives an intriguing twist to the death of Clytemnestra. Electra hears her off-stage exclaming "My son!" (*Mon fils!*), and assumes that she is begging Orestes to spare Aegisthus; so she encourages her brother to strike. Too late it becomes clear that Orestes' target was Clytemnestra, and so Electra has unwittingly urged him on to kill her mother. This evokes the climactic scene in Sophocles' play, where Clytemnestra is killed off-stage by Orestes, and Electra shouts her encouragement to him; she dominates events inside even though is separated from them, and her passionate desire for vengeance contrasts with the chorus's obvious distaste at the killing. Voltaire's Electra, by contrast, urges on the matricide only by mistake; the formal similarity only highlights how different the effect is from what we find in Sophocles.

An illustration by the draughtsman Jean-Michel Moreau (1741-1814) for an edition of Voltaire's dramas published in 1805 shows Electra almost stabbing the man whom she believes killed her brother, which is the moment when he reveals himself to be Orestes. This emphasises a further major point of contrast with Sophocles' drama, in which the recognition is preceded not by an attempted killing but by a moving lament over the urn: "the fact that, in the two closest adaptations of Sophocles' *Electra* in the eighteenth century [those of Longepierre and Voltaire], Electra's defining prop becomes not the urn but the blade aptly illustrates how the part has been altered to suit the taste of the time, not for the articulated laments of the mourner but for the visually striking pose of the avenger."[77] A further French *Electre* was produced by the scholar Guillaume Dubois de Rochefort (1731-1788) in 1782. Then the *Oreste* of 1783 by the Italian poet and dramatist Vittorio Alferi (1749-1803) contains only five characters: Electra, Orestes, Pylades, Clyemnestra, and

[77] Dudouyt (2013) 213-4.

Aegisthus.[78] It thus avoids the complications of (for example) Crébillon's adaptation with its extra romantic interests and extended families, but strikes out in a new direction from Sophocles' original by having Electra recognize Orestes at an early stage in the drama, so she is not affected by real grief upon hearing the false story of his death. In Alfieri's version Aegisthus subsequently discovers the truth and would have put Orestes to death, if the people had not rebelled against him. Orestes then kills Aegisthus and also, mistakenly in his rage, Clytemnestra; like Voltaire, Alfieri shrinks from presenting the matricide as a deliberate act undertaken in full knowledge by the children.

The play by the poet and dramatist Percy Bysshe Shelley (1792-1822), *The Cenci* (1818), was also influenced by Sophocles' *Electra*, which Shelley read not long before beginning his work; in it, Beatrice Cenci takes part in a conspiracy to murder her father, who had previously been implicated in her rape and in the death of two of his sons. Thus both Shelley's and Sophocles' dramas "are concerned with the effect of parental abuse on innocent female nature, exploring in innovative ways the conversion of the abused into the abuser. Electra becomes as cruel as her mother . . . Beatrice becomes like her father, contaminated by his blood."[79] Further similarities between Sophocles' and Shelley's plays include the recognition scene involving a brother and a sister, and the absence of any moral dilemma in the mind of the central female character concerning the killing of her parent.[80]

An adaptation of Sophocles' *Electra* by the writer and poet Peter Bayley (?1778-1823), *Orestes at Argos*, succeeded in 1825 where William Shirley's play had

[78] See Jebb (1894) lxii-lxiv for a summary and discussion of the plot.

[79] Wallace (2015) 439.

[80] Wallace (2015) 439.

failed in being performed at Covent Garden.[81] The burlesque of Sophocles' play *Electra in a New Electric Light* by the barrister and dramatist Frank Talfourd (1828-1862) was put on in 1859.[82] The earliest unadapted performance of Sophocles' original *Electra* after antiquity took place at Girton College, Cambridge, in 1883.[83] This period also saw some prominent American productions, including those directed in 1889 by Franklin Haven Sargent (1856-1923), founder of The American Academy of Dramatic Arts, at the Lyceum in New York and at Hollis Street in Boston, and one directed in 1892 by the settlement activist Jane Addams (1860-1935) at Hull House in Chicago.[84] *The House of Atreus: Three Dramas in One Act* (1952) by the American playwright and writer Burton Crane (1901-63) combines Euripides' *Hecuba*, Aeschylus' *Agamemnon*, and Sophocles' *Electra*.[85]

The first performance of the play at the National Theatre at Epidauros took place in 1938, directed by Tasos Meletopoulos (1908-76); the first one filmed complete was produced in 1961, directed by Ted Zarpas.[86] More recently, the production by the German director Peter Stein (1937–), also at Epidaurus, and then New York (2007), portrayed Electra as mad throughout, in a striking reversal of Sophocles' original.

Post-war performances in the United Kingdom include those directed by the French actor and director Michel Saint-Denis (1897-1971) at the Old Vic in 1951

[81] See Hall (1999) 281-5.

[82] See Hall (1999) 285-8; Hall/Macintosh (2005) 360-3. The title refers to the electric carbon-arc that began to be installed in British theatres in mid-century.

[83] See Hall (1999) 291-5.

[84] See Foley (2012) 29-30, 125.

[85] See Foley (2005) 330.

[86] On both of these see Taplin (1981); MacKinnon (1986) 48-50.

(starring Peggy Ashcroft, 1907-1991), by Deborah Warner (1959–) in 1991-2 (starring Fiona Shaw, 1958–),[87] by David Leveaux (1957–) in 1997 (starring Zoe Wanamaker, 1949–), and by Ian Rickson (1963–), again at the Old Vic, in 2014 (starring Kristin Scott Thomas, 1960–).[88] Critical appreciation for the last of these, a version faithful in spirit and translation to Sophocles' original, indicates the continuing vitality of the play at the time of writing, at least in England.

The Sri Lankan writer Rajiva Wijesinha (1954–) wrote his *Electra*, based on Aeschylus' *Oresteia*, Sophocles' *Electra*, Euripides' *Electra*, and Sartre's *Les Mouches* ("The Flies") in 1971; it was subsequently broadcast in 1986. In 1966 a French translation of Sophocles' *Electra* was performed in Algeria, only four years after the independence of that country from France. As the director and translator Antoine Vitez (1930-90) remarked of the performance afterwards, "the whole audience recognised in the *Electra* their nation humiliated for 25 years, subjected to colonial rule, restored to life when hope seemed lost".[89] A notable recent adaptation from continental Europe was *An Ancient Trilogy* (1990) by the Romanian-born American director Andrei Serban (1943–), which includes performances of *Medea* and *Trojan Women* as well as *Electra*; during the staging in Bucharest, "the ancient and modern worlds collided as Clytemnestra was struck down in the box in the theatre that had formerly been restored for Romania's leading family".[90] At least two other productions have seen Sophocles' *Electra* as the third in a modern trilogy, at Minneapolis in 1992 and San Diego in 2000, on each occasion after Euripides'

[87] This production involved a memorable showing at Derry, shortly after a terrorist atrocity there. See Hall (1999) 261-2; Griffiths (2009).

[88] For the 1951 and 1997 productions see Hall (1999) 298-9.

[89] Hardwick (2004) 233.

[90] Macintosh (1997) 320.

Iphigenia at Aulis and Aeschylus' *Agamemnon*.[91] Such an intriguing combination has no specific ancient precedent; but the performance of plays by different tragedians in the same production did take place in antiquity. This can be inferred from the end of Aeschylus' *Seven against Thebes*, which appears to have been altered to suit a performance at which it would be immediately followed by Sophocles' *Antigone*.

The play *Electricidad* (2003) by the American playwright Luis Alfaro (1963–) is subtitled 'A Chicano Take on the Tragedy of Electra'.[92] It sets the story of Sophocles' *Electra* in the context of Mexican-American gang violence in Los Angeles, where the play was premièred; its "most remarkable revision of Sophocles lies in weakening the male characters and introducing the *abuela* [Electra's grandmother] to create a story that revolves much more around three generations of women, despite the prominence of Agamemnon's shrine center-stage."[93]

Screen

1962 saw the famous film *Electra* by the Greek Cypriot film director Michael Cacoyannis (1922-2011), ostensibly based on Euripides' play, not Sophocles'.[94] Nevertheless, it is proper to consider it here, since we may legitimately ask "why Cacoyannis has chosen the Euripides rather than the Sophocles *Electra*, since his attitudes to tragedy and to this story in particular seem so much more Sophoclean than Euripidean".[95] It is not that Cacoyannis imports whole scenes from Sophocles' play, such as Electra's lament over the urn or Aegisthus' discovery of Clytemnestra's body

[91] See Foley (2012) 234.

[92] On this play see Moritz (2008).

[93] Powers (2005) 742.

[94] For this film see Bakogianni (2011) 153-94; Michelakis (2013) 46-51.

[95] MacKinnon (1986) 75-80.

-- although the intense joy after the recognition of Orestes by Electra in the film is something that seems to evoke Sophocles' play rather than Euripides', since in the latter the happiness of the moment is somewhat downplayed. Rather, he directs his audience's sympathies towards Electra and Orestes and away from Clytemnestra, rendering the emotional effect of the whole more akin to what an audience experiences when seeing Sophocles' drama rather than Euripides'. One way in which he achieves this is by actually portraying the killing of Agamemnon by Clytemnestra and Aegisthus at the start of the film. Although that does not take place during the timeframe of Sophocles' *Electra*, it is nevertheless described in lurid tones during the parodos, helping to turn the audience against the pair before they appear on stage; so Cacoyannis arguably is making use of a Sophoclean technique in so manipulating his audience. The omission of *dei ex machina* at the conclusion of the drama (whereas Euripides has the Dioscuri descend from Olympus to give instructions to the characters that remain) might also be taken as a Sophoclean feature; for although Cacoyannis justified their excision on the grounds that, in his view, Euripides himself did not believe in the gods,[96] the effect of their absence is to bring the film closer to Sophocles' play, which lacks any divine guidance in what seems a deliberately aporetic ending.

Other films based on Sophocles' *Electra* include the 1972 *Electre* by the French audio engineer and writer Jean-Louis Ughetto (1938-2011) and the 1974 *Szerelmem, Elektra* ("Electra, my love") the Hungarian film director Miklós Jancsó (1921-2014).[97] In Jancsó's film, "the myth is played out in the very public arena of

[96] See Bakogianni (2011) 189-90 with n. 196.

[97] For these films see MacKinnon (1986) 60-3 and 117-23; for Jancsó's, see Hames (2003).

Hungarian plains and revolutionary politics".[98] It succeeds in evoking Sophocles' play even without featuring Clytemnestra; the action is instead focused on Aegisthus. Electra believes that Orestes will return to kill Aegisthus in retribution for his killing of her father; Aegisthus (who unlike in Sophocles, is present for much of the film) announces Orestes' death and orders the people (who are present in great numbers throughout) to celebrate. The body that he claims to belong to Orestes is in fact someone else's; but shortly a messenger arrives with what appears to be genuine news of Orestes' death. Electra kills the messenger, and is sentenced to death, but the dead man returns to life: he is Orestes. After inciting a popular revolt against Aegisthus, he kills the tyrant, and departs with Electra in a helicopter. The continued presence of the people, and of Aegisthus, ensures that the film emphasises the political aspect of the myth more than Sophocles' does, although that element is not absent from the latter;[99] the audience may wonder if the film looks forward to the event that Andrei Serban's production (see above) looked back to, namely the abolition of a Communist dictatorship.

Major Works of Scholarship

The central study of the reception of Electra is Bakogianni (2011), although this book is dedicated to the reception of the figure of Electra, not specifically to the reception of Sophocles' play; so the reception of Aeschylus' *Libation Bearers*, Euripides' *Electra* and *Orestes* also form an important part of her work. It deals with aspects of

[98] Michelakis (2013) 152.

[99] See Finglass (2005).

all the fields discussed above, and includes both ancient and modern reception. A briefer account, specific to Sophocles' play, is Lloyd (2005) 117-35.

The key works on *Electra* in performance are, for England, Hall (1999) and Hall/Macintosh (2005) 152-82, and in the United States, Choatte (2009); see also Foley (2012), a vast survey which does not focus specifically on our play. Central works on the reception of tragedy in film are MacKinnon (1986), Ewans (2007), and Michelakis (2013), although none is dedicated to Sophocles' *Electra*.

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